

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE DEATH AND DISABILITY BENEFITS FOR PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS

The Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Act, signed into law in 1976, provides a federal death benefit to the survivors of the nation's federal, state, and local law enforcement officers, firefighters, and rescue and ambulance squad members, both career and volunteer, whose deaths are the direct and proximate result of a traumatic injury sustained in the line of duty.

In 1988, the Act was amended, increasing the benefit from \$50,000 to \$100,000. To help keep inflation from eroding the benefit's effectiveness, the 1988 amendment included an annual cost-of-living escalator. As a result, the benefit increases on October 1 of each year. The current benefit is \$143,943, tax free.

PSOB covers all federal, state, and local public safety officers, although its principal focus is firefighters, including volunteers, and law enforcement officers. A decedent's spouse and minor children are usually the eligible beneficiaries, although parents become eligible for the death benefit if a decedent wasn't married and there are no eligible children.

Congress amended the PSOB benefits program in 1990 to include permanent and total disabilities that occurred on or after November 29, 1990. PSOB is reserved for those few tragic cases in which an individual barely survives a traumatic, line-of-duty injury and is permanently unable to perform any gainful employment. Only then, in the presence of the program's statutory and regulatory qualifying criteria, will PSOB's disability benefit be awarded. The bill's supporters anticipated that PSOB would approve only a small number of cases annually.

An additional benefit, signed into law in November 1998, and retroactive to November 1997, provides an educational assistance allowance to eligible survivors of public safety officers whose deaths or permanent and total disabilities qualify under the PSOB Act. This benefit is provided directly to the children or spouses of covered public safety officers who attend a program of education at an eligible institution.

To initiate a claim for death benefits, to receive additional information on filing a disability claim, or to receive additional information about coverage, call or write the Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program, Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington D.C. 20531; or call (888) 744-6513.

12.2 percent of all on-duty deaths and is almost 50 percent lower than the number for the first 10 years that NFPA conducted this study. In part, this is a reflection of the decline in incendiary and suspicious fires over the same period.

Last year, two firefighters also suffered fatal heart attacks as a result of false alarms. One collapsed at the scene of a malicious false alarm, and the other died at the station after returning from an alarm malfunction. Over the past 10 years, 22 firefighter deaths have resulted from malicious calls or alarm malfunctions.

Of the 91 firefighters who died while on duty in 1998, 82 were members of local, municipal career, and volunteer fire departments, while 3 were contractors to state and federal forestry agencies, 3 were employed by state forestry agencies, 1 was a member of a state inmate forestry crew, 1 was an employee of a federal forestry agency, and 1 was a member of the military.

Generally, career firefighter deaths have declined since 1977 (see Figure 9). For volunteer firefighters, however, the trend isn't clear. The number of volunteer firefighter deaths dropped sharply from 1988 to 1994, then rose sharply in 1995 and 1996. The number dropped again in 1997 and 1998, but not as low as it did in the early 1990s. With the exception of 1994, the gap between the number of career and volunteer firefighter deaths continues to be much greater than it was in the early to mid-1980s.

Conclusions

For the past four years, the number of on-duty firefighter deaths has stayed below 100. Throughout the 1980s, the number of deaths averaged slightly less than 130 per year, then dropped sharply over the next five years only to rise again to an average of approximately 97 deaths per year. Although this almost 25 percent difference is a tremendous improvement, two persistent problem areas remain—heart attacks and vehicle crashes.

Heart attacks remain the largest single firefighter fatality concern. Although the number of fatal on-duty heart attacks has dropped by more than a third over the 22-year period, they consistently account for 40 to 50 percent of the deaths annually. And the victims of heart attacks consistently include a large percentage of individuals already known to have serious health problems, such as existing heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes. An extreme example is a firefighter who died in 1998. He was reportedly being evaluated for a heart transplant, but continued to serve as a driver and an exterior firefighter for his department.

Proper screening of fire service applicants, maintaining fitness requirements throughout a career, and annual health testing are essential tools in ensuring the readiness of the fire service for the stress of duty and in reducing the number of on-duty heart attack deaths that continue to occur each year. Use NFPA 1582, *Medical Requirements for Fire Fighters*, to screen both new and existing firefighters.

Vehicle crashes comprise the other major firefighter fatality issue. Aircraft crashes account for 22.6 percent of all the motor vehicle crash deaths in the past 10 years. But because aircraft aren't in widespread use throughout the fire service, we concentrate on highway vehicles. When we exclude aircraft and other nonhighway vehicles, we find that crashes accounted for 13 percent of all firefighter fatalities over the past 10 years. Even more disturbing is the fact that the total number of such deaths in that period—126—is only slightly lower than the number that occurred in the first 10 years—131. We haven't seen any significant decrease. Many of these deaths can be attributed to operator error, such as exceeding the speed limit, driving too fast for road conditions, failing to yield, failing to stop, and failing to wear seat belts. These deaths can be prevented through better training and driver education.

Firefighters responding in their own vehicles must obey all applicable driving laws. These vehicles shouldn't be equipped with warning devices. Tankers, particularly converted types, demand special atten-